

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Tabletop Topiary

Since the early 1970s, garden enthusiasts have flocked to Ladew Topiary Gardens in Monkton, Maryland, for a view of horticulture taken to a fanciful extreme. Of course, with a little effort, most patient gardeners can create their own topiary displays, whether to adorn a doorway or grace a dining room table.

Traditionally, topiary has been the art of training and pruning small trees and shrubs into a variety of ornamental shapes, ranging from the geometrical to the whimsical, with moments of pure inspiration, such as the manicured collection in Columbus, Ohio's Topiary Park, which recreates the impressionist figures in Georges Seurat's "A Sunday On The Island Of La Grande Jatte."

Topiary found its origins principally with the Romans more than two millennia ago, flourished during the Elizabethan period, languished somewhat during the 18th century, and once again found renewed interest with the Victorians, whose industrial mania enjoyed reshaping every aspect of the natural world.

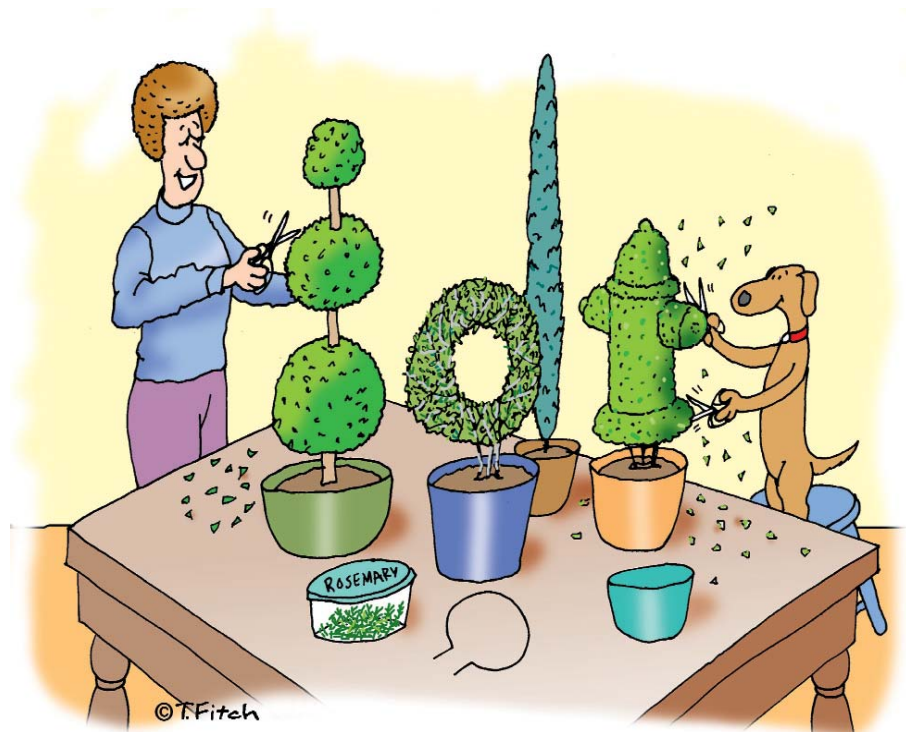
Today, topiary has moved from grand public parks and palaces to kitchen countertops and coffee tables. In fact, during the holidays, it was not surprising to see most local grocery stores and garden centers offering miniature "Christmas trees" shaped from rosemary.

One reason for the increased popularity is the modern use of herbs, such as rosemary, whose smaller growth habit and fragrant leaves permit artistic trimming and shaping, while yielding culinary cuttings and a rich, satisfying aroma, all in a very manageable size.

Herbal standards are perhaps the easiest introduction to the art of topiary for most aspiring gardeners, at least those with patience. Bear in mind that it will take approximately two years to train a simple standard, and another two for the plant to fully mature.

To begin, select a favorite herb, considering how large a standard you want in the end. Your topiary must observe elements of proportion, meaning that the smaller the leaf-size, the smaller the standard.

Assorted lavender species, curry plant, and the more than 40 species of rosemary can readily produce handsome tabletop standards ranging from eight to 18 inches or more, while larger-leaf species like sweet bay (*Laurus nobilis*) or fast-growing scented geraniums should be trained to between four and six feet.



Your plant should be well-rooted and straight, with its initial growing tip intact. Be sure not to trim or damage the apical tip until your standard reaches its desired height. Most garden centers offer herbs in four inch pots, ideal for starting out. To start training your topiary, use a 10 to 12 inch plastic or metal stake. Wooden stakes can easily rot within a year or so. Herb specialist Elise Felton also recommends wrapping metal stakes with florist's tape, both to dress up the stake and provide a stickier support for the ties needed to secure the plant during training. Secure the stem every half-inch or so, using a flexible tie. Do not use metal twist-ties, as they can damage the stem and ultimately girdle the plant. You will want to remove any leaves or needles between the stem and the stake, and also prune any side shoots that appear as the plant grows. When, or if, the plant reaches the top of the stake, remove the ties and stake and replace it with a stake 20-24 inches tall.

When the plant reaches its desired height, you can pinch the growing tip and start allowing two to four

pairs of side branches to develop. At the same time, remove any remaining leaves on the "trunk" and, if the stem has become woody, once again secure the stem with soft ties one or so inches apart.

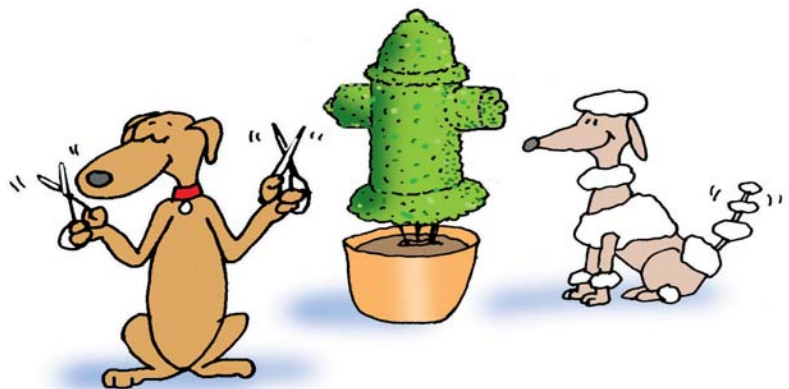
As the side shoots grow, pinch them back about every two inches or two nodes of growth. You will continue with this process every week or so, until those stubby stems take on the regal form of a globe. When complete, carefully remove the stake.

For ongoing care, be sure to provide adequate light during the cold months, when most herbs should be brought inside. However, whether indoors or out, rotate your herbal standard to ensure even growth. And inspect regularly for pests, especially mites and mealy bugs who might try to enjoy your topiary as much as yourself. And do not slack off on your pruning regimen. To keep your topiary shapely, you will need to routinely pinch back new growth, although those clippings can be added to potpourri or stew pots as an added dividend — or incentive.

Of course, there is more to topiary than formal standards. Fortunately, the growing interest in topiary has led to the wide availability of unique forms and frames onto which plants can be trained. The range of shapes is almost inexhaustible, with everything from traditional cones, spirals, and spheres, to dancing teddy bears, dinosaurs, Degas-inspired ballerinas, and letters of the alphabet, for people obsessed with monograms.

Many of the larger frames offered are actually filled with green moss, and ornamental ivy and other climbers are encouraged to cover the surface. However, for the herbal-inclined, many of the smaller basic shapes, such as wreathes and hearts, are ideal for training santolina, dwarf myrtle, prostrate rosemary, and a host of other fragrant or flavorful species.

For topiary fans anxious for quick results, there are standards, poodles, and other shapes available at nurseries and mail-order suppliers. They may lack the personal satisfaction of a do-it-yourself project, but might be the necessary first step to inspire you to designs of your own.



The **GreenMan Show** is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit www.greenmanshow.com.

Joe Keyser is the author of the GreenMan column for the *Gazette Newspapers* in Maryland, and also host of The Greenman Show. A downloadable library of previous environmental articles, columns, and reviews are available online at greenman.askdep.com. Print copies are also available by contacting DEP at the following locations:

**Montgomery County
Department of
Environmental Protection**
255 Rockville Pike, Suite 120
Rockville, MD 20850
240.777.7770 fax 240.777.7765
email: help@askdep.com
www.askdep.com

